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School Lunch Participation // [Programs]

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Nutritionists, administrators, school lunch personnel, teachers, and parents have expressed concern about participation in and acceptability of school lunch programs.

As a result of a review of the literature and years of observation, in this issue of Nutrition Program News, we will

describe some typical school lunch situations, discuss some of the factors that influence both participation and acceptability, and offer some suggestions for upgrading school lunch programs where such changes are needed.

SCHOOL LUNCH ACROSS THE NATION

School #1

This school can be found in many urban areas. Administrators and teachers view the lunch solely as a service. Teachers' union contracts relieve them of all responsibility as far as the lunch program is concerned.

Some teachers and administrators purchase the same lunch but are dissatisfied because they pay more than the children. They do not understand that the subsidy provided by law to the children cannot be extended to them. Often they request double portions, particularly of the entree, and reject the vegetables.

Because some teachers are constantly dissatisfied, the school lunch personnel are put on the defensive with demoralizing effects. Budget restrictions and the labor required prevent inclusion of some foods or forms of food that teachers suggest. Hence further criticism arises. As a result, school lunch staff, believing that they cannot please the clientele no matter what they do, lose interest and standards of food preparation begin to slip.

Children participating in such a lunch program are not encouraged to eat the lunch. Little or nothing is done to motivate them to taste unfamiliar foods. Because teachers often reject the vegetables, they set an example for the children, and plate waste on vegetables becomes appalling. When children do taste the foods, poorly prepared food such as overcooked or watery vegetables is not conducive to further tasting. So we continue to have the lunch counter separating the educational staff and the children from the school feeding staff, with dissatisfaction on both sides.

School #2

This school can be found in many areas where a fair proportion of the children are taking advantage of the free or reduced cost lunch. The community views the school

feeding program as a welfare program. Some more affluent parents are reluctant to have their children participate.

The lunch is well planned and well prepared, but some foods may be unfamiliar to the children. Teachers are assigned to keep order in the lunchroom and find this an unpleasant task. Parents want the lunch to include only those foods that are favorites of their children. School feeding personnel cannot do this and still comply with regulations. The principal is very much concerned about plate waste.

Regardless of any preventive steps taken, the children participating in this lunch program tend to be labeled as welfare recipients or "poor". Because they are unfamiliar with some foods offered and are not motivated to taste them, plate waste is high. A good proportion of the children are "brown baggers" (carry their lunch from home). Many of these lunches contain fruits and vegetables along with sandwiches and cupcakes. Observation of all lunch waste reveals that as much food carried from home is wasted as that offered in the lunch program.

School #3

This school can be found in all parts of the country. The school lunch staff are most conscientious and daily put out a lunch that looks good and tastes good. However, they are concerned about the rejection of well-prepared foods.

The administrator tries to be cooperative. Some teachers, but not all, see the lunch experience as a springboard for many classroom activities. The children are dismissed from the lunchroom to the playground.

Busy parents do not always see the lunch as a bargain both nutritionally and economically and often have their children carry a sandwich, cupcake, or cookies, and then purchase milk in school.

The children who participate in this program are offered a well-prepared lunch that at least meets the regulations

and recommendations of the Type-A pattern. The children from homes or classrooms that have offered experience with a variety of foods generally accept the lunch unless they are particularly eager to get to the playground. If a ballgame is more important than eating, a large proportion of an acceptable lunch will go into the garbage.

Children from homes and classrooms that have not offered motivating experiences with foods will often either not participate in the lunch program or will reject unfamiliar foods. Thus plate waste is increased. Lunches brought from home may or may not compare favorably with the lunch offered in school. Thus, participation and acceptability vary from classroom to classroom depending on the children's previous experiences with food and the attitudes of the parents and the teachers.

School #4

In this school, the lunch program is completely divorced from the school program in that food is provided by a catering firm. The lunch is as good or as poor as the contract demands. School districts that have staff or consultants with expertise in interpreting the school lunch pattern and in drawing up adequate contracts provide a lunch that follows both the letter and the spirit of the law. Unfortunately, many school districts do not have this expertise and the lunch may or may not be a good buy nutritionally.

The educational dimension of the school lunch in this situation is not developed adequately. Crowded conditions have resulted in staggering the lunch at 20-minute intervals beginning at 10:45 a.m. lines are long, and many children do not participate because they have to use most of the 20 minutes waiting to be served or simply because they are not hungry at 10:45 a.m.

Factors That Influence Participation and Acceptability

The descriptions given above represent the situation that results from a particular combination of factors. All possible combinations have not been included but would result in other situations. Thus, upgrading of lunch participation and acceptability is obviously a local problem and will result only if the operating factors are determined and dealt with. Following are some factors that influence both participation in and acceptability of the lunch:

Parental influence.—Some parents do not see the educational value of the school feeding experience. A child may not participate in the program because sometimes foods are served that he has not learned to accept. If the mother understood that the program is meant to help the child learn to extend the variety of food he will eat, perhaps parents would encourage the child to eat the lunch. When parents view the lunch as a welfare program, they often communicate their views to the child and the child refuses to participate in the lunch experience.

Many parents and teachers criticize the lunch because they say it is too starchy and thus too caloric. Unfortunately, they are not aware that the lunch is planned to meet the

nutrient and energy needs of children and that their needs vary from those of adults.

Influence of administrators and teachers.—Many administrators are beset with problems of all kinds. Sometimes the problems of lunch scheduling and the paperwork involved leads them to view the lunch program as a problem. Whether they intend to or not, this irritation is often communicated to the children, particularly when the only time the children see the principal in the lunchroom is when he is demanding order.

Teachers who are dissatisfied with the meal for any reason also communicate this to the children. When children, especially young children, like their teacher, they too will be dissatisfied. Thus the example set by principals and teachers greatly influences the eating behavior of children.

Influence of peers.—A peer leader often will make the decision of which foods will be accepted in the lunch or whether or not the group he influences eats the lunch at all. Elementary school youngsters often will eat what an admired friend eats. At the secondary level, a strong individual may lead a whole group to eat elsewhere even if the school administrator decrees that no one leave the school grounds at lunchtime.

The lunchroom.—If the lunch room provides a pleasant, attractive, cheerful atmosphere, the students are more likely to want to eat the foods available there.

Proximity of other eating places.—If a variety of eating places are easily accessible to students, particularly secondary school students, the school feeding staff faces a real challenge if a good participation rate in the feeding program is to be maintained. Sidewalk vendors are also inclined to vie for the business of school children. This sometimes presents a problem because some of these vendors' carts are maintained under questionable sanitary standards. Clever school lunch managers have included foods served by vendors at a lower price and maintained participation in the program. Vendors were forced to go elsewhere.

Lunch scheduling.—Both the time and the length of time scheduled for the lunch have influenced the participation rate in many schools. Youngsters who have eaten at 8:00 a.m. or later—whether at home, at school, or at the corner store—are not hungry enough to eat one-third of their day's food needs at 10:30 or 10:45, yet some schools find it necessary to schedule lunches this early. Either lunch participation falls off or the plate waste increases.

When scheduling as little as 20 minutes for lunch is necessary and enough lines for fast service cannot be provided, children tend not to buy the lunch simply because they do not have enough time to eat.

Quality of food.—Most schools serve high-quality food. When criticism arises concerning quality, usually it is because (1) poor products result from poor preparation methods or food being held too long before serving, or (2) critics associate Government-donated food with poor-

quality food, when in reality the quality is often higher than that which schools can afford to buy locally.

Poor products do affect acceptability of the lunch—if the lunch is consistently poor, participation will fall off. Schools must compete with other eating facilities including the home. Good participation is usually found when lunches in school have some relation to the children's total experience with food.

Portion size.—Size of portions is set forth in the regulations. Portions are geared to the 10- to 12-year-old child. These portions may be far too large for the 6-year-old, in which case part or most of the portion will be left. When portions are too large, some children are overwhelmed and eat less than they would have had the portion been smaller.

On the other hand, the stipulated portion may be too small for the teenaged boy and he will complain that the lunch is skimpy. For him this may be true.

The Federal recommendation for portioning suggests using the stipulated amounts for the 10- to 12-year-old group and scaling the portions down for the younger child and scaling them up for the older children, particularly the boys. Few schools do this. Everyone gets the same portion. As a result, younger children waste food and older children complain about portion size.

When asked, school lunch managers report that if they scale portions down for the younger children, State personnel consider them not in compliance with the regulations. Furthermore, some parents object to paying the same price for smaller portions. Perhaps if they understood the whole program and that when the young child reaches the higher grade, he will have more for his money, they would be less critical.

What follows lunch.—Many schools dismiss the children from the lunchroom to the playground. Often youngsters come to the lunchroom wearing wraps and carrying the basketball in their arms. Plate waste is high in these situations. It is more important to them to play than to eat. The same children, when observed on a rainy day (stay indoors), eat much better.

In Conclusion.—Acceptability of the lunch program by the community and acceptability by the children of the foods that comprise the lunch are influenced by complexity of factors—both food and nonfood. What to do to upgrade or maintain particular programs depends on which factors are operating in that specific school. Improving school lunch programs is a local problem and must in the end be solved at

the local level. However, supportive help can be provided at both the national and State level.

National—In looking at the factors, particularly the nonfood factors, that influence participation in an acceptability of school lunch programs, problems stem from limited understanding of (1) nutritional needs of children as compared with adult needs, (2) the subsidy offered to children only, and (3) the educational potential of the program.

At the national level, interpretive materials and films could be developed for use in the community—PTA groups, Rotary, Kiwanis, churches—to help parents, teachers, administrators, and other community members to understand the role of the school, the home, and the community at large in helping children learn to choose and to eat with enjoyment those foods which will best meet their needs for nutrients and energy now and in adulthood.

A public relations program, initiated at the national level and channeled to the local level through State departments of education, appears to have best the potential for improving the understanding of all those who are influencing the acceptability of the school lunch programs.

State.—First, State departments of education can review and determine whether reviewers for compliance need further orientation in using recommendations for scaling portions.

Secondly, State departments can supplement interpretive materials and visuals from the national level to further meet the needs of the particular State. These materials would be geared to increasing depth of understanding of the purpose and potential of school lunch programs at the local level.

Local—Schools are under local control, and any effort to improve any school program has the best potential when initiated in the local school district. When local boards of education and administrators recognize the educational potential of and the educational obligation for the school lunch program, improvement where needed is most likely.

When this recognition occurs, school administrators have been known to (1) take steps to determine the factors operating both for and against good participation in and high acceptability of the school lunch programs, (2) do some rescheduling where necessary, (3) arrange funding for classroom activities, (4) improve the atmosphere in the lunchroom, (5) establish good communication with the parents and students, and (6) provide help to managers in planning menus and adopting appropriate food preparation and serving practices. An excellent school lunch program is always a cooperative enterprise.

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